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To demonstrate the central position of classical education and ideas in our national history, this brief address, delivered before the first international classical meeting to convene in the United States, emphasizes the influence of the classical world and its experience (especially political experience) on the American revolution and the shaping of the Constitution. After a discussion of the all-pervasive character of classical education, allusions, and ideas in the speech and writing of the American colonies, the speech ends with a statement of faith in the permanence of the great truths embodied in the ancient classics. (Author/JH)

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THE CLASSICS IN THE NEW WORLD*

GERALD F. ELSE

This first meeting of an international Classical Congress on the western shore of the Atlantic is an occasion out of the ordinary, calling for something more than the usual greetings and words of welcome, however cordial. If I insert here, at the end of this opening session and before our proceedings actually begin, some brief remarks on the Classics in the New World, it is from a feeling that the occasion warrants a special kind of notice.

We Americans are known, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, for many things: for superhighways and apple pie, skyscrapers and slums, the biggest automobiles and the smallest support for the Humanities; for materialism and fundamentalism, friendliness and arrogance, lawfulness and lawlessness, Ralph Waldo Emerson and rock-'n-roll. Some of these things are good, others are bad; some, as Plato would say, are good or bad according to the uses to which they are put. In any case sweeping generalizations about America and Americans are often mistaken; we are too stubborn and diverse a lot to be classified under any single heading, no matter how much alike we may appear to others.

One thing for which Americans are *not* widely known is their classical culture. Modern American politicians do not habitually quote Thucydides or Cicero, as English gentlemen once did in the House of Commons; and I imagine that few of our leading men any longer read Sophocles or Horace over the port after dinner. Nevertheless, the United States of America, as a polity and as a civilization, would not be what it is today — would perhaps not exist at all — without the Classics.

Let us conduct a brief laboratory demonstration or, to put it in terms more congenial to this audience, a brief inspection of texts. It is still early in the Congress, and I trust that most of you still have a one-dollar bill somewhere about you. Take out one of those bills and look at the back of it: the *green* back. You see there, flanking the word ONE, the two sides of the Great Seal of the United States. On the verso, to the right, is the motto *E pluribus unum,* or, as we say, with the old Anglicizing pronunciation, "ee plūribus yūnum." The verso, to the left, has two Latin mottoes, *annuit coeptis* and *novus ordo seclorum,* and in the middle the English sentence, "In God We Trust."

The Great Seal was designed in this city of Philadelphia in the year 1782, pursuant to instructions originally voted by the Continental Congress on the day of Independence itself, July 4, 1776. In other words, the

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Seal was one of the very first practical tokens by which the Congress wished to declare our independence to all men. And the Latin mottoes on it are not mere decoration. They express three cardinal ideas of the young Republic: its unity, still in process of being won out of great, sometimes tumultuous, diversity; its faith that God had smiled on these new beginnings; and its confidence that those beginnings represented a new order of freedom under law, not only for America but for all mankind.

It is no accident, either, that three of the four mottoes on the Seal are in Latin, for Latin was a common possession of most of our Founding Fathers, and not only much of their thinking but much of their feeling was moulded by the study of antiquity. This was but natural, considering their history. (I should interpolate here that many of the facts that follow were culled from a fine book by an old friend and mentor: Richard M. Gummere's *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition.*) Among the colonists who came from England – and, in the case of Pennsylvania, from Germany – a surprising number were educated, even highly educated, men; and naturally, in that day, the education they had received was strongly classical. In the heat of a debate in a Virginia council in the year 1625, one Mr. Pooly, a clergyman, was taxed with "speaking false Latten [sic] and teaching false doctrines" – obviously these were both heavy, if not equal, sins. Richard Lee II of Virginia kept his journal in English, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Samuel Sewall, Chief Justice of Massachusetts and great defender of Puritan polity and religion, when presiding at a college declamatory exercise, found it natural to close the proceedings with *Claudite iam rivos, pueri, sat prata biberunt.* Or consider these Ovidian verses of his, with a truly Phaedonian message, circulated at a dinner party: *Auris, mens, oculus, manus et pes, munere fungi / Dum pergunt, praestat discere velle mori.* A grave sentiment, forsooth.

A lad who presented himself for admission to Harvard College in the 17th century was expected "to understand Tully, Vergil, or any such classical authors, and readily to speak or write true Latin in prose and have skill in making Latin verse, and be completely grounded in the Greek language." Thomas Jefferson, helping plan the curriculum of the University of Virginia a century later, accepted as a matter of course that any applicant for entrance must be able to read Vergil, Horace, Xenophon, and Homer with facility and to convert a page of English into Latin at sight. Some acquaintance with Euclid and with cubic and quadratic equations was also desired.

In a colonial land educated on such fare, it was only natural that classical tags and allusions, mottoes, cautionary verses, and so on should abound in all the occasions of life. The Virginia adventurers were, of course, Argonauts; America was the New Atlantis; William Penn was a Lycurgus, George Washington a Cincinnatus drawn from the plough; words like "ingenate," "maculation," "irritament," and "polypiety" pro-

liferated even in writings addressed to the general public; and James Madison records that Philadelphia was the first city proposed for capital of the federal union, as being "least *eccentric* of any place capable of offering due accommodation." (I might add that Philadelphia was chosen as the seat of this present Congress for essentially the same reason.)

The original seal of the State of Virginia, designed by George Mason, showed on one side *Aeternitas,* with globe and phoenix and the words *Deus nobis haec otia fecit;* on the other side, *Virtus* – mark you, not "Virtue" but *Virtus* – treading on tyranny, with the motto *Sic semper tyrannis.* These words – tragically echoed through a bitter irony of history almost a century later by the assassin John Wilkes Booth when he shot President Lincoln – these words convey, with the pregnancy which only Latin can give, the mood of the infant republic in its year of Independence. For the American colonies the road to independence and nationhood lay through armed rebellion in the name of liberty; and in that agonizing progress no motive was more constantly and consciously present to the minds of the rebels than the ancient *exempla* of liberty, patriotism, and honor. At the Virginia Convention of 1776, according to an eyewitness, "The young boasted that they were treading the Republican ground of Greece and Rome." (You may note that in those days "Republican" was an anti-conservative word.)

No one would maintain that the Greek and Roman classics directly called forth the American Revolution. Its causes were, of course, much more immediate and close to home than that. Nevertheless, something happened in the ongoing process of the Revolution – out of which our American constitution and our American identity emerged – something happened which has been of high importance not only to us but to the rest of mankind ever since. It might perhaps be said, with only slight exaggeration, that *America was the land that took the ancients seriously.* A young people, trained to liberty yet conscious of obligations to God and its fellow-men, found in the ancient classics, as it found in few other places, a kindred voice speaking of similar aspirations, similar resolves, similar trials. For all the glories of the English Common Law, all the modern realities of free federal government in Switzerland and the Netherlands, it was to Athens and Rome that our Founding Fathers looked for the model, the *idea,* of a republic. And they looked not in uncritical adulation but in sober questioning, in the spirit of Livy's recommendation for the use of history: *Inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu foedum exitu quod vites.*

What happened, in a word, was that the great men who were the statesmen of young America looked back across the gulf of centuries and found in Greece and Rome the overarching ideal of *free men governing themselves.* They were well aware how far the Greeks and Romans themselves had fallen short of the ideal. But the ideal spoke to them, it confirmed their own inmost feelings, and they dedicated to it their lives, their

fortunes, and their sacred honour. In a lower key, here is Jonathan Mayhew, preaching in 1766 on the repeal of the Stamp Act: "Having been initiated in youth into the doctrines of civil liberty as they were taught by such men as Plato, Demosthenes, and Cicero among the ancients, and such as Sidney, Milton, Locke, and Hoadley among the moderns, – I liked them: they seemed rational." That, too, is the American note.

During no episode in American history were classical history and thought more actively pertinent to the work in hand than in the framing of our Constitution and the debates over its adoption. The Constitutional Convention met in this city, in Independence Hall not quite two miles from here, from May to September of 1787. Its difficulties, among the confusions and dissensions then prevailing, were enormous, and its task, despite the ancient models, was without precedent. As the North Carolina delegates wrote to Governor Caswell in June of that year: "An Union of Sovereign States, preserving their Civil Liberties and connected together by such Tyes as to Preserve permanent and effective governments is a system not described, it is a Circumstance that has not Occurred in the History of men."

The Constitution of the United States is now one hundred and seventy-seven years old, one of the oldest written charters of free self-government in the world. Its venerableness tends to make us forget how radical it was in its time, and how dubious the prospects of its being accepted by the nation. There is no need to make exaggerated claims for the classical influence upon it. There were a number of great or at least able men in the Convention, and they were not academics. Among them they had a rich store of practical experience in war, government, and diplomacy. They did not merely listen to the past. But there is something more than ability and experience in the document they jointly produced, and in the debates which followed. The Constitution and the Federalist papers of that year and the year after are permeated by a *high seriousness,* and by a *desire and power to generalize* political experience for the benefit of all, which are rare in human history. Part of that seriousness and power to generalize came to the men of the Convention from the study of the Classics. They scrutinized the past, including the Greek and Roman past, as equals, with respect but also with critical eyes, looking for what was best, what was permanently valid and workable. In their debates no classicist can fail to mark a familiar voice. It is the accent of practical reason, probing, inquiring, searching for the principles that underlie human government: the moral and political *archai* by which societies live. It is like the voice of Aristotle, Polybius, Cicero; it deals with the same kinds of problems and in the same temper. Actually, of course, Aristotle, Polybius, Cicero, and other ancients helped contribute important ideas to the synthesis which was achieved in the Constitution: the balance of power among executive, legislative, and judiciary branches; the concept of a Senate; the awareness that a constitution also implies and fosters a way of life. Above all, without the master ideas of liberty and the safeguards of liberty under law,

the American experiment could never have worked, and we would not be meeting today in the city of Philadelphia in a *United* States of America.

I have spent time, perhaps too much time, on this part of our national story because it is so important and so little known nowadays, even to Americans—and because we are meeting in Philadelphia. It would be pleasant to report that the classical influence on our corporate life has gone on from these beginnings to still greater triumphs. The facts are rather different. Classical studies remained entrenched in our educational system until late in the 19th century. But the nation was increasingly absorbed in other tasks: it had to subdue a continent, fight a terrible war to save the Union, absorb vast masses of alien immigrants, and then, in the 20th century, learn to be a world power in a new kind of world. The relevance of the Classics to these urgent problems grew less clear. Beginning in the 1890's — long before any such winds of change hit Europe — classical education was first disestablished and then very nearly abolished. Meanwhile, the concepts of classical philology and *Altertumswissenschaft* came into our ken and we began to take our place in the international community of scholars. Today it can be said with confidence, in the words of Housman, that we have "passed the nadir and begun to climb." We have survived our disestablishment and are preaching the gospel not merely to a handful of believers but to growing numbers of young people. And in the course of our decline and rebirth we have, I think, learned a few things which may also be of interest and use to others.

America can be proud of its classical scholars, many of whom are sitting among you in this hall today. And it should be proud of its classical organizations. The American Philological Association, whose history, written by Professor Shero, is in your hands, is entering the last *lustrum* of its first hundred years. The Archaeological Institute of America is its junior by only a decade. Four regional classical associations, the nation-wide American Classical League and its mighty affiliate and scion, the Junior Classical League, boasting today over 100,000 members from coast to coast, and a host of state and local groups hold the banner high. Our problems are great but we are ready to face them, and the growing consensus that a National Humanities Foundation is needed, to marshal support and coordination for all of the Humanities, gives us hope that we may find new horizons of usefulness.

It would be tedious and unbecoming to brag too much to our visitors about what we have done in the New World. *De his rebus alias.* I prefer to close by reminding you that today all of us — you from the rest of the globe, from North and South America, Europe and Africa, Asia and Australia, as well as we from the United States — are already living in another New World, one very different from the old, and that it is gaining on us amain. It is a world of fantastic technologies, of space exploration and atomic weapons, of international communications and international conferences on everything under the sun — including the Classics — but also

of deadly conflicts and rivalries which will, we pray, not destroy mankind, a world of urbanization and the war on poverty, of great hopes but also great despair, of the alienation of men from their common heritage and from one another. It is, in the most literal sense of the word, a *demoralized* world.

George Washington is said to have said, early in the Convention of 1787, "It is too probable that no plan we propose will be adopted. Perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained. If, to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God." No Roman ever spoke more nobly, or more classically.

Where shall such a standard be found in the frightening New World of 1964? It may be said that anyhow we classicists, in our limited province, are not called upon to raise it. No law requires us to stand up and testify for reason, unity, liberty, the rights and duties of man. But the heritage we have in our keeping — the voices of Homer, Solon, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Thucydides, Demosthenes, Menander; of Ennius, Lucretius, Sallust, Cicero, Vergil, Lucan, Tacitus, and all the rest — should not let us sleep. The heritage is a perennial possession, a *ktema es aiei* in the sense in which Thucydides meant that famous phrase. It has spoken to men in the past who were called upon to save their world from chaos, like the men of the Convention of 1787. The New World which threatens to engulf us now with its faceless millions, its super-nations and organizations, and its threat of the marshalling of men for destruction, has not abolished nature, beauty, love, freedom, or the mission of literature to interpret and order our experience. The permanencies have not been dissolved, although the flux of our times may make it seem so. Above all, there inheres in the classical tradition, *hos emoige dokei,* a political and moral calling, an injunction to consider and reconsider the ways in which virtue and justice are a part of our being and the necessary basis of any future happiness for mankind.

We do have a responsibility — since no one else will assume it — to reassess and reinterpret the tradition for our fellow-men in this New World. That will take courage and imagination. For we must undertake it, not in the spirit of sole keepers of the true word, nor as an Establishment to beat Latin grammar into the backs and brains of the helpless young, but in our capacity as free men who have something uniquely valuable to share with others in the building of a free humanity.